



## EXECUTIVE COMPUTING

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# Don't judge software by its package alone

**I**n last week's column, I suggested that first-time computer users start with canned software for common business applications. This permits the user to save money and learn more about computerization before taking the risk of hiring a custom programmer. However, finding the best software requires more than looking at how nicely it is packaged.

To evaluate software, you should ask two questions: Does it meet the general requirements of all good software? And, does it meet the specific requirements of my business? For now, I'll focus on the first issue — because it is surprisingly easy to judge basic software features if you know what to look for.

### Three wrong ways to judge

The three most obvious ways to judge canned software are generally misleading. They are:

**Packaging.** Like book publishers, software publishers have learned how to make their products look enticing. Clever names, like Jazz, Framework, and The Shoe Box Accountant, and fancy binders, boxes, and even T-shirts compete for your attention. But try to ignore these factors; Some of the best programs have cute names and some don't.

**Brand name.** It's tempting to think that a well-known company that makes a good word-processing program might also have a good database program, and a good spreadsheet program. Unfortunately, brand names almost never are a sure-fire indication of good products. Indeed, some of the worst software seems to fall into this category.

**Price.** The most deceptive element of all is price. Some of the very best programs are priced very low — with the publishers hoping to make their profit through volume, and some of the worst programs are priced very high — in an attempt to fool us into equating price with

quality. Some marketers even try a double-whammy: Give the product a high list price to make us think it's great, and then sell it for a fraction of the list price to build volume. My advice: Don't fall for it!

## **The right way to judge**

Not surprisingly, the best ways to evaluate canned software require some effort. Here's what to look for:

✓ **Thousands of happy users.** The best programs are, naturally enough, very popular. Users love them, reviewers love them, and dealers love them. Also, other products emulate them. An excellent example is Lotus 1-2-3, the popular spreadsheet program. For almost every kind of business, one or two specific programs have become very popular and are widely supported. Look carefully at these.

✓ **Good documentation and learning materials.** A good manual often means the rest of the package is high quality. If the manual is not easy to read and does not have a good tutorial section, you'll probably want to discard that package without going any further. One way to judge quality is to look at the treatment of "error messages" in the manual. Some have a list explaining what the messages mean, but give no clue how to correct the errors — a sure sign that frustration lies ahead.

✓ **In-office trial period.** It is impossible to judge the usefulness of most business software during a short salesman's demonstration. Most reputable dealers have loaner packages so you can try it out on your own turf. The trial installation and testing can be time-consuming and expensive, but in the long run you'll spend only a fraction of the cost you would incur if a wrong decision were made.

✓ **Warranties and updates.** Warranties are important because almost all programs contain latent defects. And, periodically, most popular canned programs are improved and new features are added. Get assurances that defective diskettes or programs will be replaced quickly at no charge, and that the cost of updates will be nominal — especially if the initial program is expensive. For example, if the new program costs \$500, updates should be available for under \$100.

✓ **Local support by several dealers.** Like the best hardware, the best packaged software is often supported locally by several dealers. Ask about training classes, audio and video tapes, and about local experts who specialize in the program. All these are good signs. Conversely, if the program is supported by just one dealer, and is either too new or obscure to have other established support, think about what you'll do if the dealer goes out of business.

✓ **Toll-free hotline.** Finally, most of the best programs are supported by the publisher with telephone support for difficult technical questions. The hotline is imperative since dealers must have someone to turn to when the going gets rough. If the service is not provided — or if the telephone line has a reputation for always being busy — you'll be the one to suffer later.

## **Final advice**

More than anything else, the software you choose for your small computer will determine the success of your business computing — and maybe the success of your business.

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